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What triggers problem recognition? An exploration on young Australian male problematic online gamers

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Abstract

Help-seeking is a complex decision-making process that first begins with problem recognition. However, little is understood about the conceptualisation of the help-seeking process and the triggers of problem recognition. This research proposes the use of the Critical Incident Technique (CIT) to examine and classify incidents that serve as key triggers of problem recognition among young Australian male problematic online gamers. The research provides a classification of five different types of triggers that will aid social marketers into developing effective early detection, prevention and treatment focused social marketing interventions.

Keywords: Social marketing, help-seeking, problematic online gaming

Track: Social Marketing

1. Background

There is a growing consensus that excessive amounts of time spent on online games are producing symptoms of problematic behavioural and negative mental health outcomes like depression, suicide ideation and also behavioural addiction (Grant, Potenza, Weinstein, & Gorelick, 2010). A possible explanation for this phenomenon has been attributed to online games being used as an escapism tool for online gamers for coping and modifying their moods (Griffiths, 2010). Young men with “moderate” to “very high” psychological distress have been found to spend significantly longer and more frequent periods online, particularly gaming with others as compared to young men with “low” psychological distress (Burns et al., 2013). Hence, this places young Australian males as the most vulnerable segment for developing problematic gaming behaviour that can present further negative outcomes for their mental well-being. Of particular concern is the reluctance of young men to seek help from professional mental health services as compared to young women (Addis & Mahalik, 2002).

To address this problem, both social marketing (Schuster & Drennan, 2011) and psychology literature (Reavley, Cvetkovski, Jorm, & Lubman, 2010) emphasises the need for research and interventions to encourage early help-seeking towards achieving mental well-being. However, progress in the help-seeking and problematic online gaming literature is hindered by a lack of conceptual clarity, defined scope and validated consistent measurements (Rickwood & Thomas, 2012). Furthermore, there are inconsistent and insufficient understandings as to the type of incidents and social influences that triggers problem recognition for those with problematic behaviours (Barber, 2002). This is important as it is widely acknowledged that problem recognition must first transpire before decisions to seek help for problematic online gaming can occur (Cornally & McCarthy, 2011). To understand this first step toward help-seeking, this paper aims to examine the triggers that promote problem recognition of problematic online gaming.

2. Conceptual foundation

2.1 Help-seeking

Help-seeking is a complex decision-making process that represents the intentional action to solve a problem that challenges one's personal abilities. It begins with problem recognition and definition which leads to decision to act, that is predominantly influenced by social-cognitive factors (Cornally & McCarthy, 2011). It is an adaptive form of coping that is reliant on social relationships and interpersonal skills to seek help from informal sources like friends and family, and formal sources like professional services (Rickwood, Deane, Wilson, & Ciarrochi, 2005). However despite the array of existing help-seeking theories, little is understood within the help-seeking and social marketing literature about the triggers of problem recognition. The primary reason for this predicament is the poor uniform understanding among help-seeking theories which have a predominant descriptive focus rather than an explanatory focus in identifying and understanding the individual predictors of the help-seeking behaviour (Rickwood, et al., 2005). Furthermore, many psychotherapeutic research do not articulate the means by which individuals come to use the process of choosing to seek help (Timlin-Scalera, Ponterotto, Blumberg, & Jackson, 2003). This is a crucial research gap given that problem recognition is the first step to help-seeking. To understand this research gap better, the problem recognition literature was first examined.

2.2 Problem Recognition

Problem recognition and definition is the first step towards help-seeking whereby the individual identifies the problem for which help is sought (Cornally & McCarthy, 2011). It is based on the interaction between one's desired state and actual state. The desired state refers to the way a person would like their needs met while the actual state refers to the degree to which a perceived need is actually being met. Therefore, problem recognition occurs where a significant difference develops between a person's desired state and actual state regarding a particular want or need. Moreover, individual differences affects the way a person defines a problem (Herden & Lyles, 1981). For problematic online gamers to recognise their problematic behaviour, social marketers must first bring to their attention, the vast difference between their desired and actual needs that is subjective to individual differences. To better understand this phenomenon, the Stages of Changes is an appropriate segmenting model to provide further insight into how problem recognition operates within individuals.

2.3 Stages of Change

In the social marketing literature, the Stages of Change (Prochaska & DiClemente, 1982) is a valuable segmenting model successfully applied in numerous addiction contexts that categorises people with problematic behaviours into five stages. Similar to help-seeking, it posits that behavioural change is described to occur as a result of gradual intra-individual changes which are of a cognitive nature that begins with problem recognition. However, slightly different to the problem recognition process, it posits that problem recognition and behavioural change can come about swiftly often as a result of life events or external pressures (Stotts, DiClemente, Carbonari, & Mullen, 1996). It proposes that people contemplate changing their behaviour primarily when the magnitude of their problem becomes so intolerable that it forces them out of problem denial and into recognising their problematic behaviour and the need to handle the problematic behaviour (Prochaska & DiClemente, 1983). This is consistent with numerous addiction studies where the respondents often do not seek help until they experience a crisis such as major relationship or financial problems (Shek, Chan, & Wong, 2012). Hence based on this understanding, this suggests the

importance of incidents in triggering realisation within problematic online gamers of the vast difference in their desired and actual state of needs. Thus this research seeks to answer the following research question with an appropriate qualitative methodology:

Research Question: *What are the incidents that trigger problem recognition in young Australian male problematic online gamers aged 18-25 years old?*

3. Methodology

This research proposes the critical incident technique (CIT) as a suitable qualitative technique to identify types of incidents that trigger problem recognition in young Australian male problematic online gamers. It is a relevant qualitative method that asks participants to recall incidents that can be identified as positive or negative. However, similar to qualitative techniques like interviews, CIT is reliant on its respondents to give accurate and truthful reports which may be subjected to recall bias, consistency factors or memory lapses (Michel, 2001). However, the distinct advantage of CIT lies in its ability to provide respondents, the opportunity to provide their own detailed account of their experiences and to determine which incidents are the most relevant to them (Stauss & Weinlick, 1997). CIT also does not restrict observations to a limited set of predetermined variables and allows for interaction among all possible components in the phenomenon (Koelemeijer, 1995). Hence, this allows the CIT to be capable of yielding rich and contextualised data that reflect critical incidents which allows the researcher to identify similarities, differences and patterns to seek meaningful insights into the behaviour (Flanagan, 1954).

In this study, semi-structured interviews were conducted where participants were asked to recall: (1) examples of incidents that triggered them to realise they may have problematic online gaming behaviour and (2) incidents that confirmed this realization. Content analysis was used to classify incidents “into categories and groups according to similarities in reported incidents” (Bitner, Booms, & Tetreault, 1990) where open coding and axial coding was proceeded to identify and separate key incidents into key categories (Fielding & Lee, 1998).

4. Sample

The findings of this paper are based on the results of a pilot study that used convenience sampling (n=5). Five young Australian men between the ages of 18-25 years old who self-reported to have previously experienced problematic online gaming with Massively Multiplayer Online Role-playing Games (MMORPGs) were used in this study in consideration that the research is only interested in those who have already recognised their problematic online gaming behaviour. Only by using this type of sample can the research understand the critical incidents that led to problem recognition.

5. Findings

In this research, a total of 16 positive and negative incidents were discovered that revealed five different types of incidents that triggered the respondents to realise their problematic online gaming. These include time wasting, negative life event from gaming, family influence, embarrassment and new life events.

5.1 Time wasting

Time wasting was the most commonly cited trigger towards problematic online gaming recognition among respondents. As mentioned by one respondent, *“Usually when I start gaming, its light and when I finish sometimes its dark and it annoys me. And that’s when I don’t feel very good. It makes me feel like I’ve wasted the day.”* This revealed that when respondents spent a significant amount of time online gaming and were aware of the amount of time spent. This realisation made them feel more negatively about their online gaming behaviour which ultimately contributed to their decision to stop or reduce their online gaming. This is because as reported by another respondent, *“I just woke up one day and I decided that I am not making much sense doing this, staring into the monitor. So I decided to spend more time with my friends and family.”* Hence based on these findings, it suggests that the concept of time being wasted online gaming, could be an importance element that triggers not only problem recognition but also a motivator for problematic online gamers to stop or reduce their negative behaviour.

5.2 Negative life events

Negative life events was another commonly cited trigger that pushed three respondents into thinking and realising their problematic online gaming. According to one respondent, an incident occurred while he was gaming online with his friends, when one of them stole an item in-game during a party quest. This transpired into real life aggression where the organiser of the party, along with some of the party members, went to confront the gamer after school and forced the person to return the in-game item back, *“So one of the organisers, he was really unhappy about that and he bought the whole gang just to go and find that guy and take the items back....It was in real life.”* Other similar negative life events reported, as a result of their problematic online gaming behaviour were neglected studies, dropping grades, family confrontation and physical pain. As one respondent mentioned, *“I realised that when I sit down, and my back hurts, I might have been in the gaming position for quite long. And that serve as a mild wake up call.”* These life events were reported by respondents to have brought their immediate attention to their online gaming behaviour which pushed them to reduce or stop their online gaming.

5.3 Family Influence

As mentioned by one respondent, *“It’s more likely to be because of the confrontations by my family members. But I would normally shout back at them in response. They were confronting me because I was like spending too much time gaming.”* He revealed that because of his family’s confrontation, this made him realise that he needed to control his problematic online gaming. However interestingly, though he mentioned that his family played an impact on his decision to reduce his online gaming, he mentioned that it was not the trigger that made him realise his problematic online gaming behaviour. *“And the reason why they (Family) did that was because they probably just want to spend time with me. But the thing was that I would always just shut them out and just play games. This was probably the period from young all the way till post diploma, around 20. About a 10 year gap. I was more close to my friends online and friends that I meet outside than my family”.* When asked if his friends made him realise about his problematic online gaming behaviour, he claimed that they did not play impact but rather it was because of his dropping grades. Hence this reveals that social influence from family and peers may not have a strong influence towards problem recognition but rather, plays a supporting role in pushing problematic online gamers towards reducing their problematic online behaviour. This supports previous findings where social influence

impacts an individual's decision to reduce their problematic behaviour (Rothi & Leavey, 2006).

5.4 Embarrassment

Embarrassment is another problem recognition trigger that was cited by a respondent to be one of the incidents that made him reconsider his online gaming behaviour. According to his excerpt, *"And I think some family and friends visited and I was just playing on my computer and I think I might have looked stupid as I was in my pyjamas."* The embarrassing incident of being caught in his pyjamas and playing online games by his visiting family and friends, made him view his online gaming behaviour negatively. Furthermore, he mentioned that he was embarrassed about his schoolmates finding out that he played a certain MMORPGs, *"I didn't want other people knowing that I play WOW.... So that was that element of shame about it in school"* Hence this reveals that the element of embarrassment associated with online gaming, could be a key trigger in problem recognition that social marketers could reinforce among problematic online gamers.

5.5 New Life Event

Positive incidents like new life events (e.g. army and pursuing an academic degree) was found have positive effects in helping problematic online gamers realise their problematic online gaming behaviour. As cited by one respondent mentioned, *"I would not say I've reduced it, but I just balance it out. Just have a gradual reminder that there is a deadline for everything except for games. Well it's not very hard when you're studying a degree and you have assignment and exams deadlines. So you just like plan, this phase I won't be touching games."* This indicates that when faced with new life events that are of importance to the individual, problematic online gamers will have to make a decision to choose whether to continue their focus on online gaming or to focus on the new life event. Further evidence can be seen where a respondent mentioned, *"And maybe it was just moving on to another phase in life. Other things needed my attention more."* Such findings are supportive of Barber's (2002) and Miller's (1998) argument that people can change for positive reasons (significant new life events).

6. Theoretical and Practical Contributions

Hence based on these findings, this research though still in its infancy stage, has provided both significant insights for social marketers and made novel contributions to the help-seeking, social marketing and problem recognition literature. The research through its unique qualitative methodology, has uncovered five potential problem recognition triggers where little consideration has been given to the types of incidents that triggers problem recognition within the problematic behavioural context. These findings also make a practical contribution for social marketers in identifying potential triggers of problem recognition that will facilitate early detection, preventative and treatment-focused social marketing interventions. Overall, the findings offer transferable insights to the triggers of problem recognition for other problematic behaviours such as gambling, excessive alcohol consumption and substance abuse.

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